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BOOK WEEK
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Bringing them in from the cold

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By William V. Shannon

STRANGERS ON A BRIDGE: The Case of Colonel Abel. By James B. Donovan. Atheneum. 432 pp. $6.95.

An odd aspect of the cold war is the hardy persistence of the gentleman amateur in diplomacy, the private citizen who executes difficult, confidential missions. One might have thought that the heavily staffed diplomatic, intelligence, and propaganda services of the United States and Russia would have made these 19th-century survivals obsolete, but apparently the very size and rigidity of the rival monoliths make the private agent more useful than ever. Because he has no official status or prestige, he can be more flexible and, if necessary, he can be disavowed when things go wrong.

The best known of these special operatives in recent years has been Brooklyn attorney James B. Donovan. In 1957-'58, he was the court-appointed defender of Soviet spy Rudolf Abel. Early in 1962, after nearly two weeks of secret negotiations in East Berlin, he arranged for the swap of Abel for Francis Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot, and another American held on espionage charges. Later that same year, he successfully negotiated with Fidel Castro for the release of the Cuban exiles captured in the Bay of Pigs invasion. More recently, Donovan has been negotiating with considerably less success with the leaders of the school integration movement in his capacity as president of the Board of Education in New York City.

Donovan has now written a book about the first of these free-lance public assignments, his defense of Abel and his role in the Abel-for-Powers exchange. "Strangers on a Bridge" is an interesting, highly readable, but in some ways unsatisfying book. It makes several claims on a reader's attention. One of them is simply as a spy story. The spy has been caught when the story opens and much about his nine years of work in this country is never spelled out, but readers who enjoyed "The Spy Who Came In From the Cold" and similar works of fiction will find this account of an actual spy fascinating. The book also has the appeal of a courtroom trial, a dramatic subject that almost never fails to be engrossing even when, as in this instance, the outcome is virtually foreordained.

Donovan has cast his book in the form of a diary. He writes in a spare, straightforward style, avoiding heroics or purple patches. The first sections are marred by some irritating cliches (the trial "loomed like a storm cloud," something else stuck out "like a sore thumb," and on another occasion we "plunge in icy judicial waters.") But there are only a few of these minor blemishes in what is otherwise a commendably written work.

Donovan obviously intended to write a book that would be an object lesson for his fellow Americans, particularly other members of the bar, on some of the essentials of our civil liberties tradition. He has succeeded admirably, and no one familiar with the depressing state of public information and opinion on civil liberty issues will doubt that it is a lesson that needs frequent teaching. Donovan cites his experience as general counsel for the OSS and as a trial lawyer as the principal reasons why the Bar Association thought him uniquely qualified to undertake Abel's defense. It is probable that the facts that he is a Brooklyn Irish Catholic, a graduate of Fordham College as well as Harvard Law School, and a well-to-do attorney for insurance companies and other respectable clients also uniquely qualified him to represent an accused Soviet spy in the post-McCarthy atmosphere of seven years ago.

As it was, he had to have his phone switched to an unlisted number to escape crank calls, and he was subjected to considerable personal innuendo and criticism. "One night at the Brooklyn Bar Association an elderly Catholic lawyer asked me, with deep emotion, if I didn't feel at times an 'overwhelming sense of guilt.' I was too shocked to make an adequate reply." This book constitutes an impressive reply to those who refuse to understand that our Constitution in the Sixth Amendment clearly requires that *every* accused person "have the assistance of counsel for his defense." Donovan carried Abel's case to the Supreme Court, where he came within one vote of overturning the conviction on the grounds that the evidence had been obtained through an illegal search and seizure which is clearly forbidden by the Fourth Amendment. This 5-to-4 decision evoked astonishingly ignorant editorials from newspapers across the country; a typical one declared: "Freeing of a master Russian spy on a *mere technicality* would have been a grave miscarriage of justice."

As Donovan observes: "The Supreme Court, of course, does not deal in technicalities. It is difficult to comprehend how mature Americans can equate the Fourth Amendment with the cliche 'mere technicality.'"

If "Strangers on a Bridge" is unsatisfying, it is because the most interesting character is the Russian spy known as Rudolf Abel, about whom we learn just enough to tantalize us but not enough to relieve our curiosity. It is no reflection on Donovan to say that one would rather read a book by Abel. We can comprehend the mind and motives of a public-spirited American lawyer, but this brilliant colonel in Soviet Intelligence is a more special and less easily understood figure.

A man of about 60, fluent in several languages, he read Einstein for relaxa-

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tion, was a gifted painter, and did problems in mathematics and taught French to his cellmate to pass his time in prison. He exhibited extraordinary self-discipline under stress, and he had a remarkably good understanding of American law for one who had spent his life in the service of a Byzantine totalitarian state. At times, Abel comes into focus with startling immediacy as in a dream but through much of the book and in the end, again as in a dream, his mind and motives elude our understanding. We would like to know much more than Donovan could possibly learn about his client.

James B. Donovan

Someone who emerges more clearly is the author himself, who comes through as a blunt, combative, no-nonsense man. Reading between the lines of his book, one can see why Donovan is currently having his troubles in the New York integration imbroglio. His style and talents are more suited to negotiations with tough Communists behind the scenes than to mediating and conciliating diverse factions in a public controversy. But who knows? He may be keeping another diary in preparation for a book about school integration which will be as winning as this account of his venture in international diplomacy.

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